

Michigan Bear Hunters Association

2/12/08 Testimony in Support of House Bill 5331
House Committee on Tourism, Outdoor Recreation and Natural Resources

Good morning. My name is Bill Walker. I live in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. I'm a member of the board of directors of the Michigan Bear Hunters Association, and I'm here to testify on behalf of my organization in support of House Bill 5331 and to thank Rep. Howard Walker for being its primary sponsor.

We're a statewide group, founded in 1946, and have worked hard over our life to try to assure the well-being of the bear, bobcat, coyote and wolf.

House Bill 5331 essentially does away with a needless and unfair licensing regulation.

The regulation does nothing to protect game animals. It brings in virtually no revenue. It hurts hunter recruitment. And it harms relations between hunters and the DNR.

Please let me explain.

The regulation we're attempting to eliminate says on a bear or bobcat hunt with dogs not only do the armed persons who are trying to take the animal need a license, but so do others who are along on the hunt.

Ironically, it was our association who persuaded the state Natural Resources Commission back in 1987 to create the participation license. We did it to protect bears.

Back then, the bear kill was not capped by the limited license, or permit, system we have in force today. Large groups of out-of-state houndmen were hunting the Upper Peninsula for the entire 52-day season. Licenses were unlimited and they could be bought over the counter.

Because nonresident bear licenses were and are expensive (in 1986, a license cost \$150.25), all members of these large groups would hunt off just one or two licenses. As they bagged bears, they would buy additional licenses to keep at least one unfilled license in the group. We told the NRC these groups were hurting bear numbers, and the NRC agreed.

The 1987 participation license requirement forced everyone in the group to buy a \$150 license before the hunt. That was the end of the large out-of-state, season-long groups.

But when the statewide bear permit system was created in 1990, it negated any need for participation licenses. License quotas were now set for each bear management unit, which capped the number of hunters and thus controlled the harvest.

So, the participation license no longer protects bears.

And it raises almost no money.

Last year, I checked with Dave Bostick, then-bear/furbearer specialist with the state Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife Division. He said the DNR sells about 1,300 to 1,500 participation licenses a year. At \$15 each, 1,500 licenses generate \$22,500 in revenue, less than one hundredth of one percent of the DNR's annual budget.

In addition, the license hurts hunter recruitment, especially the recruitment of youngsters, which is a major interest of our association and a goal of the DNR.

Let me read to you from the DNR's 2007 Michigan Hunting and Trapping Guide. The guide informs hunters and trappers of the current regulations they must abide by.

This is under the heading: "Special Rules for Young Hunters (10-16 Years of Age)."

It reads, "Hunters can be licensed at age 10. A hunter must be at least 12 years old to hunt deer, bear, or elk with a firearm. . . . Exception: Everyone 10 or older is required to have a license to hunt when participating in a bear or bobcat hunt with dogs."

This impediment inhibits introducing young people to the sport, particularly when last year the DNR proposed raising the cost of the resident bear participation license to \$50.

What's more, the license is unfair and vague, and so creates difficulties between hunters and the DNR.

It's discriminatory. The exception I just read you is the only exception. Nowhere in the DNR guide does it say for any other hunting sport that participation requires a license. You don't need a license to help your dad put out bait for a bear, but you do if you help him put a dog down on a bear track.

And there is no regulatory definition of the word "participate," so it's left to the citizen along on the bear hunt to wonder what is and isn't "participating," and it's left to the conservation officer to use his discretion.

And for all these negatives, what good is accomplished?

We've come to you, because our appeals to the DNR in meeting after meeting over the last half-dozen years have gone unanswered. The DNR has continually expressed sympathy, but nothing ever happens. Now, that we've come to you, it seems the DNR, far from being sympathetic, actually has opposed getting rid of the participation license all along.

So, in one sense, I guess we're making progress with the DNR today. At least, we're having a meaningful discussion.

Thank you. May I answer any questions?

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